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SUBJECT: ATTEMPTS TO HALT CONFLICT IN UPPER JONGLEI

REF: A. Khartoum 482, B. Khartoum 292

¶1. (SBU) Summary: There have been clashes between the SPLA and Lou Nuer herders associated with the White Army, a continuation of conflict that first erupted during attempts at disarmament last January (reflets). Recent attempts by the SPLA to again forcibly disarm the White Army militia near Toich has resulted in fighting that has left about 100 dead, including civilians, and has destabilized the Nyirol and Uror areas. The instigators and the chronology of events depend upon who is telling the story, but the attempted SPLA disarmament of the White Army has clearly inflamed the situation. The international representatives based in Juba are urging a halt to military action and a return to dialogue. End summary.

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Chronology of Events

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¶2. (SBU) The latest round of unrest began in late April when Lou Nuer herders, many of whom are young men affiliated with the White Army tribal militia, refused to disarm and then moved their herds west from the arid area around Yuai to the banks of the Toich River, forcing their way through the normal territory of other groups. Vice President Riek Machar, Security and Police Minister Daniel Awet, SPLA officers, tribal chiefs, and area MPs had held meetings seeking a peaceful solution to the contentious migration, including disarmament of the White Army. Some herders reportedly agreed to surrender their arms in return for SPLA escort and protection, but when teams of chiefs, SPLA officers, and White Army representatives went to collect the arms from various cattle camps, some agreed (and turned over 700 arms) while others refused, saying disarmament would prevent them from protecting their herds from rival groups.

¶3. (SBU) SPLA troops escorting the disarmed groups reportedly began requisitioning as many as 30 cattle per day for food. The herders complained, then drove their herds to join other camps that had not disarmed. SPLA troops followed the retreating Lou toward the armed camps, where a SPLA reconnaissance force stumbled into a White Army force. In the ensuing clash, the White Army defeated the SPLA force. The next morning, on or about April 26, a reinforced SPLA force with truck-mounted heavy weapons attacked a camp and defeated the White Army. Forty-three herders were killed in the fighting, including six women and two children. When the Lou fighters fled the scene, the SPLA reportedly seized the cattle left behind.

¶4. (SBU) The White Army counterattacked and in turn defeated the SPLA, which suffered an unknown number of casualties. Jonglei Governor Philip Thon Leek dispatched the Jonglei State Minister of Social Development, the

Commissioner for Peace, and two area MPs to the area to negotiate a settlement. The SPLA detained the group briefly before allowing them to meet with the White Army and tribal leaders. The delegation warned the herders that they risked losing their cattle if they continued to fight, and the herders proposed that they move toward the traditional Lou area, where they felt more secure, at which time they would discuss disarmament.

¶5. (SBU) The SPLA reportedly renewed the fighting on or about May 7 as the negotiations took place, and in the ensuing combat an estimated 51 additional herders were killed. Munitions exhausted, the White Army fighters retreated, leaving cattle and families behind. They later claimed that two tribal leaders sent back to negotiate with the SPLA were shot and unknown parties seized large numbers of cattle from the Nuer women who were bringing the cattle back to Lou. For security reasons, the UN withdrew its staff and NGOs from the area. According to the most recent report on the situation, Lou Nuer herders are moving through arid country as their herds begin to suffer from lack of water. The SPLA has stopped its pursuit of the Lou Nuer and is now collecting cattle, which they reportedly intend to return to the herders. The exact nature of the fighting and the total number casualties remains unknown.

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The Significance  
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¶6. (SBU) Gatkouth Duop Kuich, the MP from Waat, told CG that he had not gotten a sympathetic hearing from either the Minister for Cabinet Affairs Justin Yaac or Vice

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President Machar when he returned to Juba from Waat and requested that the GoSS order the SPLA to desist from further attempts at disarmament. Kuich claimed that Machar told him that the SPLA must continue to press for disarmament; Kuich pushed instead for a period of calm during which the retreating herders could be provided humanitarian assistance as a first step toward renewed negotiations. He said that if the SPLA persists with forced disarmament, the White Army would not easily give up.

¶7. (SBU) There is a possibility that the conflict could widen to include other groups. Holdout South Sudan Defense Force (SSDF) militia commanded by Gordon Kong and Thomas Mabior operate north of the Lou area and could ostensibly attempt to provide ammunition to the White Army to rally them to the SSDF side. Simon Gatwich, the former SSDF Lou Nuer leader and now SPLA general, is reportedly very unhappy with the course of events. Some of his former SSDF fighters who followed him to the SPLA remain encamped north of the Lou area, not yet integrated into the SPLA, and theoretically could become involved as well. Deputy SPLA Commander Paulino Matip, who brought the bulk of the SSDF over to the SPLA, is also displeased. Kuich claimed that Matip told him that if the SPLA stops its activities, he would personally travel north to help calm the situation.

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Comment  
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¶8. (SBU) The recent fighting is part of a complicated historical chain dating back to 1991, when Machar split from the main body of the SPLM and, along with others, armed the White Army to protect the Lou Nuer, who were neglected by both the SPLA and Khartoum. The result was a largely apolitical, but heavily armed tribal militia that provided protection for cattle camps, but also engaged in notorious cattle raiding against neighboring

groups, including their traditional rivals, the Dinka Bor. Neither side is blameless in this long cycle of violence, but the heavy-handed SPLA attempt to force disarmament in an area that it has never controlled fully certainly helped trigger the latest violence.

¶9. (SBU) The international community in Juba, including the U.S., has used high-level contacts with the GoSS to urge restraint and a return to negotiation before the violence intensifies. We will continue to pursue this outcome. End comment.

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